



## Review of 'Metropolitan World Atlas'

Clarke, P. (2006). Review of 'Metropolitan World Atlas'. *Perspective, The Journal of The Royal Society of Ulster Architects*, 15(3), 108-109.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

### Published in:

Perspective, The Journal of The Royal Society of Ulster Architects

### Publication Status:

Published (in print/issue): 01/05/2006

### Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via Ulster University's Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

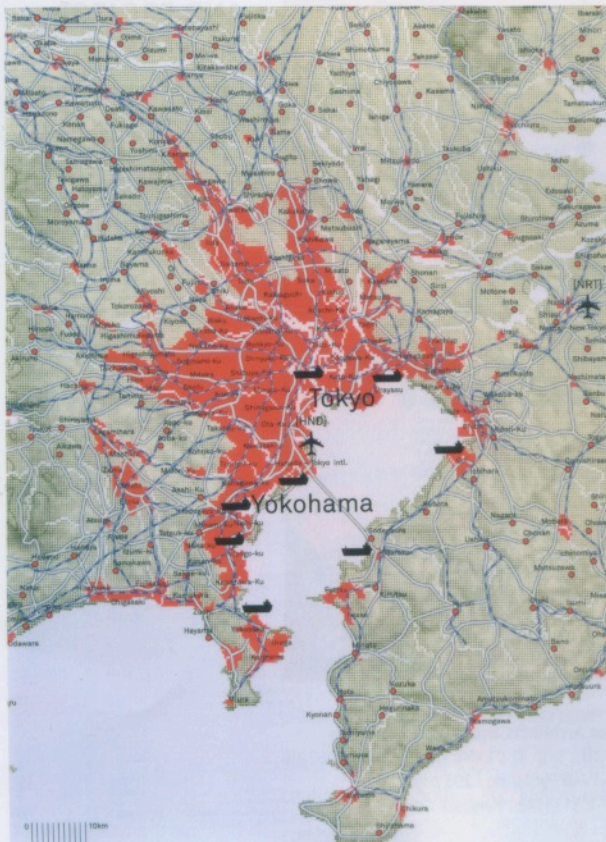
The Research Portal is Ulster University's institutional repository that provides access to Ulster's research outputs. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [pure-support@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:pure-support@ulster.ac.uk).

## METROPOLITAN WORLD ATLAS

By Arjen van Susteren

The cover of this book confirms our suspicions of what the contemporary city now looks like: a sprawling tentacular organism that continually absorbs towns and villages into its metropolitan web. This new emblem for the metropolis has long since erased our idealised notion of concentric zoned circles around a CBD. A look at Google Earth reveals that cities are too shapeless to conform to any theory we try to place on them.

These vast urban configurations are growing by stealth. They are to a large extent uncharted, as we struggle to come to terms with their shifting unpredictability. While American cities such as Atlanta continue to sprawl at an incredible rate, others like Detroit are in a condition of critical decay – haemorrhaging their population to other more successful cities. Meanwhile in China, new and unfamiliar cities are blossoming overnight with the surge of economic development.



## Metropolitan World Atlas



“What this Atlas gives is an at-a-glance overview of the relative size, shape, key facts and figures of such differing cities as: Bogotá, Dubai, Montreal, Paris, Mexico City, Sydney, Bangkok, Taipei, Bangalore and Vancouver. But this is no travel primer. We are dealing instead with statistical figures and graphic abstractions to convey metropolitan size and global relations.”

But how do we measure the growth or decline of these global metropolises? Exactly how large or densely populated are they? How can we compare cities that are culturally, demographically and geographically so different?

The Metropolitan World Atlas attempts to provide some answers to these questions. It presents a statistical and cartographic survey of 101 of the world's largest cities. Maps show the urban figure of each metropolitan area at the same scale (1:750 000) – their shape (or shapelessness) indicated in a vibrant day-glow orange like the ink blots from a Rorschach test. Each city is

chosen for an examination of its urban ‘pathology’ on the basis of being: the largest in population; having the busiest seaport; the largest airport; or the busiest telecom ports.

Tracked across its wider physical terrain, each metropolis is shown with its road networks, rivers, adjacent settlements, airports and topography in as much detail as the scale will allow. Beside each map (on the facing page) are various statistics such as on the economy, health, crime, employment, road use and commuting time. These facts are illustrated by percentage fill circles – where the world ranking is shown ▶



► by the degree of colour fill. These circular info-grams are presented again in the final section of the book, where with other information they form constellations of global hotspots.

In the short introductory essay, we trace the rise of the modern city and discuss how its fortunes are woven into intricate social, political and economic conditions. Mobility and the creative manipulation of the 24-hour time zone in the global marketplace are having the same impact that once the car, the telegraph and the railway had on urban development. Cities that can engage the global marketplace through technological outsourcing reap the benefits of investment and growth.

At times some of the large amount of statistics in the book seem to evaporate, and leave an almost blank page (due to unavailable information). These curious voids are perhaps the most eloquent way to question the relevance and manipulation of such information, and in turn their correspondence to shaping the cities. Facts on pollution,

vehicle density and commuting times suggest the presence of sulphurous clouds beyond the statistical pages and shadowing the real metropolitan areas. In tandem with this physical shadow is the role of the invisible: the virtual. If global competitiveness is now measured in megabits per second, is this unseen network of connections somehow shaping the city's physical form and programmes, and in turn propelling its scatter and dispersion across the landscape?

The Metropolitan World Atlas does not aim to, nor can it ever, answer all these wider questions. Instead it reveals snapshots of the strange patterns of sprawl and development of the world's metropolises that are still waiting to be decoded and unravelled with time. Los Angeles and Tokyo-Yokohama are our urban equivalent of the Rosetta stone - competing with one another as to which will be the largest and most complex 'ink spot' to decipher amidst the other 101.

What this Atlas gives is an at-a-glance overview of the relative size, shape, key facts and figures of such

differing cities as: Bogotá, Dubai, Montreal, Paris, Mexico City, Sydney, Bangkok, Taipei, Bangalore and Vancouver. But this is no travel primer. We are dealing instead with statistical figures and graphic abstractions to convey metropolitan size and global relations.

Mapping the constantly shifting metropolitan tides of the world's largest cities is something of a Sisyphus enterprise. Not all cities are enshrined in greenbelts and some flourish vibrantly where literally no planning controls exist at all. As cities such as Hong Kong continue to densify with little or no increase in available urban area for development, others are sweeping across the landscape with the force of an unstoppable concrete glacier. This book is a unique document in that it captures the momentary pulse and temporal urban footprints of the world's largest metropolises. ●

Paul Clarke

#### METROPOLITAN WORLD ATLAS

By Arjen van Susteren

010 Publishers, Rotterdam 314 pp, €34.50

[www.010publishers.nl](http://www.010publishers.nl)

### Atlanta United States

